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“French outskirts burning!”

A critical appraisal of the 2005 autumn events

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«Le spectacle n'est pas un ensemble d'images, mais un rapport social entre des personnes, médiatisé par des images ... Le spectacle ne peut être compris comme l'abus d'un mode de la vision, le produit des techniques de diffusion massive des images. Il est bien plutôt une '*Weltanschauung*' devenue effective, matériellement traduite. C'est une vision du monde qui s'est objectivée...La réalité vécue est matériellement envahie par la contemplation du spectacle et reprend en elle-même l'ordre spectaculaire en lui donnant une adhésion positive. La réalité objective est présente des deux côtés. Chaque notion ainsi fixée n'a pour fond que son passage dans l'opposé: la réalité surgit dans le spectacle et le spectacle est réel. Cette aliénation réciproque est l'essence et le soutien de la société existante ».¹

In 1967, the notorious French thinker *Guy Debord* (1931-1993), one of those who preceded and announced the 1968 student moment, wrote his famous book with the provocative title: '*The society of the Spectacle*' (deutsch: *Die Gesellschaft des Spektakels* 1978). In about 100 pages and 221 paragraphs he denounced our modern societies where reality is hidden behind the signs and where the public images and representations of things have become more important than their contents.

In another way, the French writer *Honoré de Balzac*, in his “Comédie Humaine” (Human Comedy) has given an account of the XIX^e century French society². According to him, society is not only ‘opaque’, i.e. a dense reality difficult to understand and to come to grips with. This is so because society is a play, a performance, a setting in scene, as the American sociologist *Erwin Goffman* has diagnosed since the end of the 1950s³. I will try to follow their steps and peel off some elements of this play with regard to the events of autumn 2005, described in the media as: “*French outskirts burning!*”

Still, at this stage, media, news papers, radio, TV, internet chats do not yet come into play. *Guy Debord* has denounced the exploitation of the social interaction between individuals or groups of people for the sake of the economic and/or the established political power. These critics arose at the very beginning of the *Marshall McLuhan* society, in which the media are the message, where media are developing to become the “fourth power” of society and – indeed essentially so – of the globalized society⁴.

About 40 years later, it seems that *Guy Debord* is rather outdated with his analyses, not because his critical predictions have turned out to be wrong, but – just the other way – because they have turned out to be all too true. Reality has overthrown the worst forecasts, as the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Centre, New York, shockingly have demonstrated in September 2001. The spectacle

of the “Human Comedy” has evacuated reality itself, and reality has become a copy of the media spectacles. Social actors in our daily life and more and more performers – willingly or not – take part and place themselves in the settings of the mediated scenes.

The media reports about the French ‘*Banlieues*’ in autumn 2005 are part and parcel of this setting. A great spectacle was happening. Its construction was telling more about the ‘hidden curriculum’ of the French society than about the open reality of the French suburbs. But what is the reality of the “*banlieues*”? What can the events tell us about the suburbs of large French cities?

The story has to be put ‘in context’ in order to be understood: The context – as constructed and presented – is related to the ‘supposed’ issue of migration. In fact, one should name it rather the issue of the presence of French citizens from North African, Arabic, Asian or African origin, who are living, as it is their full right, on the French soil and in the French Republic. That would be much more a question of recognition of the many ‘ethnic’ differences within the democratic welfare state. The context is also related to the issue of “*laïcité*” (non-religious civil society) and the presence of a large minority of people who – because of their religious faith and their cultural roots – try to establish a strategy of recognition of their differences. The context is also, alas, related to all sorts of manipulations, e.g. to ultra radical Muslim movements claiming their rights for their religious differences. The context is – visibly – as well linked to the ‘*youth issue*’, more precisely to the issue of *underprivileged* young people.

In the 1960s, the French scholar *Jean Monod*⁵ criticised the traditional ritual that leads a society to anxiously question itself about the youth issue, as this is directly related to its own perspectives of the future. At that time, the youth issue that drew the attention of the media and all kinds of experts then was part of the working class issue, i.e. the risk of being left at the margin of the developing industrial society. Today, however, the youth issue concerns less a would-be working class but rather the lowest social class of *foreign migrants*, which in other European countries is called the ‘*underclass*’. In the French context, the recognition of the ethnic dimension of the claims that young people in the suburbs have acted out in front of the media has determined the scenery.

To put it blandly: The 2005 autumn events in France are not an ‘ethnic’ problem, not a ‘religious’ problem related to the secularity (*‘laïcité’*) of the French society and not a ‘youth problem’ either, although those who have demonstrated in the streets were young (male) people. Moreover, they have not been a symptom of crisis of social ‘integration’ or of the ‘French Republican Model of Integration’. Other models such as the British, the German, the Swedish, and the US American are also going through heavy crises. In my view, these riots have to be basically understood as problems of ‘*social exclusion*’, a concept aiming at pointing out the break off “of the link between an individual and society, brought about by the fact that individuals are put in a situation where they are unable to conform to the dominant patterns of behaviour in a given society through which is gained the social recognition and the social integration.”⁶

In a recent article published in the news paper ‘*Liberation*’, *Jean Baubérot*, a notorious expert on ‘secularity’, has stated:

‘People do all the time as if the problem was eternally integration, when it turns to be much more that of inventing a new collective future.’⁷

Sometimes, with regard to hot and sensitive issues, it can be useful to forget the day to day reports or the sociological or anthropological approaches, and to move on to traditional political philosophy. Taking e.g. *Macchiaveli*’s book ‘The Prince’ (Il Principe) could be worthwhile, which proclaims: In order to further peace and to better maintain the social order, governors and all people in power have to give some kind of hope to those who are governed. If they want to stay in their position, the members of the ruling class have to *preserve hope* for a better future or at least of getting along for the people dominated. Deprived from any hope, having nothing to loose, people tend to go on protests, riots and even civil war.

A large part of those who demonstrated last autumn in France, in fact have no decent future before them. Under-qualified, illiterate, not mastering either French or their original language, living in urban zones where the unskilled market is devastated – unemployment rates get at 40%-45% high for these groups of young people. It should not be forgotten that that kind of rotten situation can be found anywhere in supposedly ‘developed’ countries, such as US-American ghettos or British slums or yet in rotten parts of re-united Germany.

In the case of France in 2005, in the reports on the autumn-events a lot of manipulation has happened. Some accounts were published of successful life stories of people coming from these poor and deprived areas, who had become entrepreneurs and were now running small or even medium size companies. Such ‘fairy tales’ went along with the recall of the existing strategies set up by successive governments to ease the integration of the socially excluded (young) people. But after 25 years of governmental initiatives in this field, the state policy of the would-be integration is widely perceived as inefficient.

Since 1981, the first time when the suburbs had to cope with *ethnically deprived* young people, many initiatives and actions had been taken by French social policy. But now it is time to admit that they have not worked properly for a larger part of these minorities, as they still are excluded (now in their third generation). Something radically different has to be developed. At least their dignity and their identity should not be put at stake and challenged – as it has been before and during the riots.

These minorities are trapped in a situation where there is no way to escape. When there is nothing to live up to and to strive for, the *issue of ‘Identity’* becomes the final good worth fighting for. That is the claim they expressed in a forceful way, far beyond the words they could not use because of their poor language skills. It is worth recalling that some youngsters even burnt the car of their neighbours who conveyed them from time to time to the job centre or down town. It was reported, too, that one young guy lighted up his sister’s car, by incident! The attacks were not ‘against’ the rich, the attacks were against themselves, in a way. Student protesters in Prague 1968, at the moment of the Soviet invasion, committed suicide or mutilated themselves, too, as if they wanted to send out calls for help to a broader public.

Another manipulation occurred by turning the attention *only* to the discrimination phenomenon. No need to say that ethnic discrimination is very common-

place in France: concerning access to the job market, to housing, even to entertainment and dance clubs. But in the aftermaths of autumn 2005, the media focussed on the recruitment-discrimination of those who were successful in the educational system, either in high school or even at university, when entering the job market (or willing to enter it), after the successful end of their training at university. Nobody would deny the reality and seriousness of that specific problem. However, it concerned only a minority of the population living in these kinds of deprived areas in question and diverted the attention from the fact that the bulk of the problems of the '*Banlieue*' is related to *trans-generational* mechanisms of social exclusion.

This social exclusion is the key problem that has been expressed through the 2005 autumn events. Still, I would say that the major factor influencing the *public coping strategies* related to these events was the political competition between the runners of the French Presidential Election (to be held in 2007):

When times are changing at a fast pace, when future seems bleak, obscure or unknown, the feeling of insecurity spreads out. A lot of research has been done on the issue: Open riots linked with group violence, robbery, physical attacks are largely imputable to feelings of insecurity concerning one's personal and collective future⁸. As France – and Europe – are perceived as facing no bright future, the feelings of insecurity quickly spread out, especially amongst the most vulnerable groups, those who are not yet in a situation of social exclusion but in a situation of either risk of exclusion or of downward social mobility.

Since the last Presidential Election, with the astonishing presence of the extreme right wing on the second ballot, insecurity has been put at the heart of the political debate with the *figure of the immigrant*, with the ethnic foreigner as the scapegoat. Manipulation on this issue has always existed and has been acted out by the European Fascist movements in the 1930s and 1940s in most horrifying ways against Jews and other ethnic minorities.

As the next Presidential Election is approaching, right wing politicians in France have put the issue of migrants at the heart of their 'political debate'. Each of the would-be candidates thus strengthens the muscles in order to show that he/she is the most able to control situations of public disorder. This challenge has the price of voluntarily 'lighting the fire': That is the story of the incendiary fireman who wants to show his ability to fight a fire by lighting it himself. That was initiated by naming the deprived young people living in the shabby outskirts of the cities a '*rabble*'. When you have nothing else except your pride, to be treated as 'rabble' by people who represent the highest state power is a mark of disregard and disrespect. It is an indicator, above all, that the so called integration has not been achieved.

However, looking at the politicians as actors involved in the game, the scenery seems to be quite simply structured. The leftist side is taken in internal divides striving for the best person to represent each left wing group in the next election. The President of the Republic keeps silent most of the time. Thus remain only two proponents for the next election: the Prime Minister and the President of the majority party that is 'supposed' to support the President of the Republic. When the marginalized young of the suburbs try to voice their claims for recognition of their identity by burning and destroying their neighbours'

cars, politicians as candidates for the next Presidential Election enter in an over-bid process for more and more security, i.e. forceful repression of protest movements.

The second manipulation on the political side has been acted out as an international manipulation. In this respect, it was worth looking at the permanent CNN reports on the French autumn events. The same for the major American newspapers: “*Paris is burning!*” or “*Civil War in France!*” were their headlines. After all, no death was to deplore, while the cars were burning. I am not sure that in the ghettos of major US cities the same would be true. As to the number of young people who were arrested in France, they even were less in three weeks of supposed ‘riots’ than within one night of public demonstrations within Hong Kong, in December 2005.

All the orchestrated stories from some occidental countries seem to be a kind of revenge or permanent rivalry. This time it was France, tomorrow it will be the United Kingdom, after tomorrow Germany and, of course, the USA all over. In short, behind the whole ‘*montage*’ of the stories about the ‘riots’ in the suburbs of the French cities, at least two components can be discerned: (1) the hidden and shameful question of social exclusion within the ‘developed’ Western societies, and (2) the less shameful exploitation of the situation of the socially excluded people for political – be it domestic or international – purposes.

My final remark is related to the ensuing mass protests that France, from February to April 2006, has seen on its streets with surprise. That was a sort of suspension point at the end of a story that might be continued. First, a handful of cars had been set on fire in Paris, i.e. in its deprived suburbs. The extinction of the fires was achieved about the peaceful time of Christmas and winter holidays; it reassured the national government that the introduction of a new law would allow more flexibility and reduce precariousness at the time of the first recruitment of the young for the labour market. This initiative, however, had three *unplanned* key effects:

- It established a bridge between the young people of the lower classes (strata) of the French society and the university students, i.e. the young people from the middle and upper classes. When the protest movement was, above all, initiated by groups of students in the universities and highschools (Lycées), it became evident that these two groups of prospective competitors on the labour market were as concerned as the deprived youth of the suburbs. The new law which was called ‘*Contrat Premier Emploi*’ (CPE) – for a while in the heat of the public protest – filled the gap between those at risk of social exclusion and those at risk of social under-qualification and precariousness. Both groups of youngsters felt endangered to remain out of stable jobs and/or careers at least in the first part of their working life. Thus, the CPE created in a ‘*tour de force*’ the public solidarity of a generation, from two different categories of the population with opposite roots and divergent life-trajectories. Once again, in the French context, youth proved – as a generation – to be able to act as a social force, putting political pressure on the democratic system.
- Pointing to the youngsters, the fires in the suburbs left implicitly the impression that the issue of social exclusion was at stake. The students’ and colle-

gians' revolts, on the other hand, left the effect of raising and pointing out the *common threats* that the young generation as a whole was faced with. But, also the older cohorts of youth were facing new norms regarding the 'work code'. To a large extent, I would say, the students' and collegians' revolt was not a mere revolt of young people, but of a *trans-generational movement*. A larger section of the wage-earners felt threatened by the new insecurities introduced through this law. By its second 'tour de force' the French government thus reunited different generations against a project that was perceived as a threat to the Republican social contract, i.e. against the common social order.

- Last, but not least, these two movements of November 2005 and early Spring 2006 have demonstrated that in (post) modern times, '*La Chose Publique*' – the 'Res Publica' – cannot be ruled out without listening to the people who are directly or indirectly concerned by the political decisions taken. The 'public sphere' is a 'space' of expression and negotiation, stimulated by media feedback and 'spectacles' which cannot be ignored.

Endnotes

- 1 *Debord, Guy* (1967). *La Société du Spectacle*. Buchet/Chastel, p.12, §§ 4, 5, 8.
- 2 Balzac, Honoré de (1842) : Avant propos à la Comédie Humaine. <http://port-lingua.pdx.edu/psu-svp/fr427/avantPro.pdf> «Dans ces six livres sont classées toutes les ETUDES DE MŒURS qui forment l'histoire générale de la Société, la collection de tous ses faits et gestes, eussent dit nos ancêtres. Ces six livres répondent d'ailleurs à des idées générales. Chacun d'eux a son sens, sa signification, et formule une époque de la vie humaine. Je répéterai là, mais succinctement, ce qu'écrivit, après s'être enquis de mon plan, Félix Davin, jeune talent ravi aux lettres par une mort prématurée. Les Scènes de la vie privée représentent l'enfance, l'adolescence et leurs fautes, comme les Scènes de la vie de province représentent l'âge des passions, des calculs, des intérêts et de l'ambition. Puis les scènes de la vie parisienne offrent le tableau des goûts, des vices et de toutes les choses effrénées qu'excitent les mœurs particulières aux capitales où se rencontrent à la fois l'extrême bien et l'extrême mal».
- 3 *Goffman, Erwin*, (1959), *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Doubleday & Co., Garden City, NY
- 4 *MacLuhan, Marshall* (1962), *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- 5 *Monod Jean* (1971), *Les barjots*, Paris, Union Générale d'Édition (Coll. 10/18)
- 6 *Jean Charles Lagrée* (2004), *Pauvreté, Exclusion Sociale, Désaffiliation, Underclass*. In : Aspects de la recherche jeunesse : Risques, désavantages, opportunités. Documents de la Journée CESIJE du 28 Janvier 2004. Luxembourg 2004 éditions du CESIJE asbl.
- 7 *Baubérot, Jean* (2005) . *La Laïcité revisitée*, in : *Libération*, 03. 01. 2005
- 8 *Frank Braun, Frank Coffield, Jean Charles Lagrée, Paula Lew Fai, Adinda Vanheers-wynghel* (1990), *Jugendarbeitslosigkeit, Jugendkriminalität und städtische Lebensräume*. Literaturbericht zum Forschungsstand in Belgien, Frankreich, Großbritannien und der Bundesrepublik Deutschland (Koordiniert von *Jean Charles Lagrée und Paula Lew Fai*). München: DJI-Verlag.

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